



Research Article

Gender, Safety, And Higher Education: A Study of Women's Security Concerns on College Campuses in The Wake of Recent Harassment Cases

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ABSTRACT

Gender-based harassment continues to pose a serious threat to female students' safety and well-being on college campuses, despite legal safeguards and progressive ideals in higher education. This study examines perceptions of safety among female undergraduates, evaluates institutional mechanisms for reporting and redressal, and investigates the influence of recent high-profile harassment cases on campus culture and policy. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through surveys (n=300) and in-depth interviews (n=30) across three Indian universities representing diverse geographies. Findings reveal that a significant proportion of students feel unsafe in hostels and poorly lit campus areas, with limited trust in institutional complaint mechanisms. While awareness of harassment has increased—partly due to media and social activism—tangible improvements in infrastructure and campus responsiveness remain limited. The study highlights the gap between formal policy and ground-level practice and underscores the need for survivor-centered reforms, enhanced security infrastructure, regular audits, and student-led safety initiatives. These insights call for sustained, intersectional approaches to ensure inclusive and equitable learning environments.

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KEYWORDS: Campus Safety, Gender-Based Harassment, Female Students, Institutional Response, Perceived Safety

INTRODUCTION

Background & Context

Gender-based harassment on college campuses remains a critical challenge globally. Though higher education is often viewed as a progressive space, incidents of verbal abuse, stalking, sexual harassment, and assault continue to threaten female students' well-being. In recent years, widely publicized sexual harassment cases have spotlighted how fragile campus safety can be, even on campuses celebrated for academic excellence.

Significance & Problem Statement

As institutions of higher learning, colleges and universities have both a moral and legal responsibility to ensure environments where all students feel safe and able to pursue their education without fear. Whether from fellow students, staff, or outsiders, harassment creates lasting trauma, impacts mental health, and undermines academic performance. This study explores women's experiences of safety on campus and how recent harassment claims have shaped perceptions, policies, and practices.

Research Questions

1. How do female students perceive physical, emotional, and psychological safety on campus?
2. What role does college infrastructure play in these perceptions?
3. How effective are internal reporting mechanisms and institutional responses?
4. To what extent have recent high-profile harassment cases influenced behaviors, policies, and campus culture?

Research Objectives

- Assess perceived safety among female students in campus spaces.
- Explore infrastructural and cultural factors affecting safety.
- Evaluate the accessibility and responsiveness of reporting systems.
- Gauge the impact of recent campus harassment cases on institutional practices and student awareness.

Scope & Methodology Overview

This study adopts a mixed-methods design, combining online survey data with in-depth interviews. It includes a sample of 300 female undergraduates across diverse fields in three universities, supplemented by 30 qualitative interviews. Ethical approval was obtained to ensure confidentiality and provide resources to participants.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Context

Challenges to women's safety on campuses are longstanding. Early feminist scholars like Acker (1990) emphasized the persistence of male-dominant environments in academic institutions, leading to continued risks. Despite legal

advances—such as the Vishaka Guidelines (1997) and UGC Anti-Sexual Harassment Regulations (2015)—enforcement remains inconsistent.

Campus Safety Studies

Research has shown that women commonly report feelings of vulnerability in spaces such as hostels, cafeterias, and public transport access routes (Tripathi & Pattanaik, 2018). Regular harassment—including catcalling, invasive staring, and unwanted touching—has been documented by diverse student groups.

Legal & Institutional Frameworks

In India, the 1997 Vishaka judgments set guidelines for preventing harassment. Subsequent UGC regulations require anti-sexual-harassment committees (ICC) within campuses. But as Ravi (2021) notes, formal policy often doesn't translate to effective practice—there is poor awareness and slow grievance redressal.

Theoretical Foundations

- Feminist theory critiques structural power imbalances.
- Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) shows how gender safety intersects with factors like caste, class, and sexuality.
- Space and Gender Studies explore how campus architecture—like poorly lit alleys or open grounds—can enable harassment (Valentine, 1992).

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This mixed-methods study combines the breadth of survey data (n=300) with the depth of semi-structured interviews (n=30) to create a nuanced understanding.

Sample & Sampling

Participants were female undergraduate students across three universities—urban, semi-urban, and rural—selected via stratified random sampling to ensure diversity across disciplines and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Data Collection Tools

- Survey Instrument: A 40-item online questionnaire covering demographics, perceived and actual safety, infrastructure quality, reporting options, and institutional trust, rated on 5-point Likert scales.
- Interviews: Conducted with 30 participants (average 45 minutes) to delve into personal experiences and responses to recent high-profile incidents.

Ethical Considerations & Limitations

Informed consent and confidentiality were prioritized. Participants could withdraw any time. Ethical approval was secured. Limitations include potential self-selection bias and restricted generalizability beyond the sample group.

IV. Findings and Analysis

1. Perceived Safety

Campus Area	% Feeling Unsafe
Hostels	60%
Classrooms	15%
Campus Walkways at Night	75%
Public Transport Stops	80%

- Interpretation: The majority consider dormitories and night-time routes to be the most unsafe. Classrooms feel comparatively secure due to peer presence.

2. Infrastructure & Security

- Lighting: 70% rated lighting as inadequate.
- Surveillance: 55% acknowledged installed cameras, but 40% reported coverage gaps.
- Security Personnel: While 65% believed guards are present, less than half felt these guards were well-trained or responsive.

3. Campus Culture

- 85% had experienced or witnessed dismissive attitudes after reporting harassment.
- Instances of shaming, victim-blaming, and administrative inaction were frequently reported, contributing to a culture of silence.

4. Reporting & Awareness

- 45% knew about ICC presence; 30% had trust in the complaints process.
- Of those who experienced harassment (n = 120), only 12% filed complaints; the rest refrained due to mistrust or fear of backlash.

5. Impact of High-Profile Cases

- 90% said such cases raised awareness—but only 25% said they led to real institutional change (e.g., better lighting or additional patrols).
- Interviews suggest media scrutiny prompted temporary measures but lacked long-term follow-through.

V. DISCUSSION

- National & Global Comparisons
- These patterns reflect findings from both Indian and international contexts (Nilsson & Ohrnberger, 2018). Like elsewhere, the study reveals that campus safety is shaped as much by environment and attitudes as by official policy.

• Policy vs. Reality

Despite legal frameworks, policy implementation lags. Faculty and officers often lack training to address student complaints effectively, enabling repeated harassment.

• Role of Social Media & Activism

- Nearly 70% of participants said recent harassment disclosures on social media prompted peer discussions about safety. Student-led initiatives—‘Consent Campaigns,’ helplines, mapping unsafe zones—have emerged, showing grassroots potential for positive change.

• Broader Implications

- Campus safety extends beyond physical protection. It ties into academic equity, mental wellness, and retention rates for female students, particularly from marginalized communities.

VI. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Findings

While harassment awareness is high, tangible safety improvements—especially infrastructure upgrades and reliable grievance systems—are insufficient. Campus culture and gendered stigma further prevent an effective response.

Recommendations

- Infrastructure Upgrades: Improve lighting, CCTV coverage, and transport access at night.
- Regular Safety Audits: Involving female student representation.
- Training for Guards & Staff: Emphasize gender sensitivity and survivor support.
- Institutional Reforms: Strengthen ICCs with transparency, timelines, and survivor confidentiality.
- Student-Led Safety Initiatives: Empower peer ambassadors and real-time reporting apps.
- Policy Implementation: Shift from one-time responses to sustained interventions.

Future Research Directions

Further research should track longitudinal safety changes and extend to graduate students, campus staff, and rural-urban comparisons. Intersectional analysis—on caste, sexuality, or disability—would yield deeper insights into diverse experiences.

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